

Nancy Pelosi

1940–

UNITED STATES REPRESENTATIVE

DEMOCRAT FROM CALIFORNIA

1987–



Image courtesy of the Member

WITH FAMILY ROOTS IN AND A DEEP COMMITMENT to the Democratic Party, Nancy Pelosi worked her way up the leadership ladder, eventually serving as House Minority Whip in 2001. On November 14, 2002, the Democratic Caucus elected Congresswoman Pelosi the House Minority Leader—the highest-ranking woman in the history of the U.S. Congress.

Nancy Patricia D'Alesandro was born in Baltimore, Maryland, on March 26, 1940, the daughter of Thomas D'Alesandro, Jr., a U.S. Representative from 1939 to 1947 and, later, three-time mayor of Baltimore. Nancy D'Alesandro graduated with an A.B. from Trinity College in 1962. She married Paul Pelosi, and they raised five children. After moving to San Francisco in 1969, Nancy Pelosi became active in California politics. In 1976, she helped orchestrate then-California Governor Jerry Brown's win in the 1976 presidential primary in Maryland. Starting in 1976, Pelosi served as a Democratic National Committeewoman (a post she held until 1996). She also worked as Philip Burton's campaign aide and became a close protégé of the San Francisco Congressman, who was dean of the state delegation. After his death, Burton was succeeded by his wife, Sala. From 1981 to 1983, Pelosi chaired the California Democratic Party.¹

Shortly before Sala Burton's death in February of 1987, Burton endorsed Pelosi as her successor. With Pelosi's knowledge of the state party organization and the support of Burton's backers, she won a close race in the special primary and won easily in the runoff election of June 2, 1987. In nine re-election campaigns in her heavily Democratic San Francisco district, Pelosi received an average of more than 80 percent of the total vote.²

When Pelosi took her House seat in the 100th Congress (1987–1989) on June 9, 1987, she received assignments on two committees: Government Operations; and Banking, Finance, and Urban Affairs. In the 102nd Congress (1991–1993), Pelosi

moved to two other assignments: Appropriations, where she remained through the 107th Congress (2001–2003), and the Committee on Standards of Official Conduct, where she served through the 104th Congress (1995–1997). She eventually rose to be the Ranking Democrat on the Appropriations Subcommittee on Foreign Operations. In 1995, she was given a seat on the House Select Intelligence Committee where, by the 107th Congress, she served as the Ranking Member. In the 108th Congress (2003–2005), she served as an ex-officio member of that panel.

As a Representative, Pelosi has focused attention on human rights issues abroad and health concerns in her San Francisco district. She has been an advocate for more research on and funding for HIV/AIDS. “AIDS,” she noted in 1992, “is the paramount issue in my district.”³ Pelosi pushed for a federally funded needle exchange program to prevent the incidence of HIV infection among drug users. During a House Floor speech she declared, “Science, not politics, should lead on public health policy. The science is irrefutable. Needle exchange works and works well.”⁴ Pelosi also has been a consistent champion of human rights in China. To that end, she fought Presidents George H.W. Bush and William J. Clinton, who sought to extend China “most favored nation” trade status.

Pelosi rose steadily up the leadership ladder and earned a reputation as a master fundraiser for her strapped fellow Democrats. She served as a member of the formal Democratic Steering Committee and also held a vice chairmanship on the Democratic Study Group, an informal caucus of policy and reform-oriented liberals. In 1992 she was named to head the Democratic National Platform Committee. On October 10, 2001, Democratic colleagues chose Pelosi as the Democratic Whip, the number two party position in the House, when Michigan’s David Bonior resigned the job to run for governor. When Pelosi assumed the post on January 15, 2002, she became the first woman ever to hold the position. As Minority Whip during the 2002 elections, she visited more than 90 congressional districts on behalf of Democratic candidates.⁵

Within a year, Pelosi topped her Whip milestone, when Democratic Leader Richard Gephardt relinquished his post. On November 14, 2002, the Democratic Caucus overwhelmingly chose Pelosi as Minority Leader, the highest position any woman has been elected to in Congress or in either of the two political parties. On her selection, Pelosi commented, “I didn’t run as a woman. I ran as a seasoned politician and an experienced legislator. It just so happens that I am a woman and we have been waiting a long time for this.”⁶ In 2003, Pelosi became the first woman candidate for Speaker of the House. Over the past half-century, Democrats in the House were never more unified than they have been under Pelosi’s leadership, voting together a record 88 percent of the time in 2005.⁷

FOR FURTHER READING

Biographical Directory of the U.S. Congress, “Nancy Pelosi,”
<http://bioguide.congress.gov>

NOTES

- 1 *Politics in America*, 2004 (Washington, D.C.: Congressional Quarterly Inc., 2003): 82–83; *Who’s Who in American Politics* (New York: Bowker, 1999).
- 2 “Election Statistics, 1920 to Present,” <http://clerk.house.gov/members/electionInfo/elections.html>.
- 3 Glenn F. Bunting, “Pelosi’s Prominence in Party on the Rise; Lawmaker: The San Francisco Congresswoman Will Deliver a Speech and Preside Over Proceedings to Adopt the Platform,” 14 July 1992, *Los Angeles Times*: A6.
- 4 *Congressional Record*, House, 105th Cong., 2nd sess. (28 April 1998): 2445.
- 5 David Von Drehle and Hanna Rosin, “The Two Nancy Pelosis: New House Leader Stresses Her Political Skills,” 14 November 2002, *Washington Post*: A1.
- 6 Edward Walsh, “House Democrats Take Pelosi to Be Their Leader,” 15 November 2002, *Washington Post*: A11.
- 7 Martin Kody, “Party Unity: Learning to Stick Together,” 9 January 2006, *CQ Weekly*: 92.